DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 025 533 TE 500 139

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The Boundaries of Language and Rhetoric: Some Historical Considerations.

National Council of Teachers of English, Champaign, Ill.

Pub Date May 68

Note- 9p.

Journal Cit- College Composition and Communication; v19 n2 p109-17 May 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55

Descriptors- Composition (Literary), *English, *History, Language, *Language Role, Language Styles, *Literary Conventions, Philosophy, *Rhetoric, Social Influences

Important ideas and events in the history of rhetoric are examined in order to illumine the present situation, especially the problem of defining the concept of rhetoric. From Plato's hostility to rhetoric and Aristotle's epistomological rehabilitation of it to the later ethical emphasis of Cicero and the Medieval Christian rhetoriticians, the relation of language and rehtoric in former times is discussed. The effect of shifting definitions of rhetoric, the influence of the New Critics, and the way in which freshman composition courses are taught today are also considered. (BN)

COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

Volume XIX May 1968 No. 2

ED025533

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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The Boundaries of Language and Rhetoric: Some Historical Considerations

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THE TOPIC "Boundaries of Language and Rhetoric," considered in its historical dimension, should perhaps suggest some sweeping and careful survey of the changing sense of difference between the given structure of language and the persuasive uses men try to make of it. Preferably, we should begin approximately with Thales, end with Chomsky and whoever is writing the current Volkswagen ads, and along the way throw into sharp and illuminating contrast whatever it is that the contemporary state of any given language absolutely requires of its users, and whatever options are left open to them as they use language in an effort to save, swindle, or seduce. Abjuring any such grandiose intentions, I want rather to examine a few ideas and events in the history of rhetoric, partly in order to exemplify what rhetoric may be by showing what it has been, but mainly because earlier ideas about it throw a surprising amount of light on problems we now face. Perhaps I should also point out that the phrase "some historical considerations" has a double meaning. I expect to consider both some things that were done and thought about the relations of language and rhetoric in former times, and some of the new dimensions the problem acquires when we take into account that men and their languages and cultures pass through time.

To get under way quickly, we can start with a fairly flat and highly controversial assertion that in the long run rhetoric does have to define itself pretty much as "what is left over after linguistics"; and I'm not sure that is a pejorative definition. What it means is that linguistics ideally discovers or creates an exhaustive system of categories to describe all that is generalizable about a language, i.e., what has happened in it recurrently enough to be called "predictable" for groups of uses large enough to be statistically significant and over a period of time at least long enough for the phenomena to be observed and verified. As we all know, any such categorical accounting has to simplify *out* of the account a number of the features of any given instance. (Probably that is one major reason why we really need different systems of linguistics—structural, generative, et al.—because each different system has its own built-in tendency to simplify out a slightly different set of features.) To oversimplify the point, with the consequent inevitable slight inaccuracy, the true-blue perfected linguist could tell us infallibly what all users of the same language at the same stage of its history are bound to have in common in their verbal behavior in any given situation. But in all of its historical definitions (and I think in most of its modern ones), "rhetoric" necessarily implies a competition, the thrust of some one deliberately idiosyncratic piece of verbal behavior to impose itself upon the common behavior of others. In other words, to impose through language a particular community of response, over and beyond that given in the structure of the language itself, and far more immediate.

It is this competitive aspect, and the reaching for effects beyond the rationally common ones, that the earliest rhetorical theorists seem to have centered on, although with the expectable violent differences over practical and ethical con-

sequences. Plato early struck a note that still echoes among us in his radical distrust of the whole rhetorical enterprise. The *Gorgias* shows him at his most negative, castigating those who claim to teach a system (apart from dialectic) for persuading other men; but Plato is more interesting and enlightening taken positively. For him, the whole issue was simple: men need only to sit down and seek the truth through dialectic. For any man to try to impose personal views through persuasive rhetoric would intrude the possibility for error into the certain pursuit of truth, would substitute shadow for substance. It is for very similar reasons, even now, that those who are most certain they know the absolute truth are quickest to label other people's rhetoric "propaganda" or "brainwashing."

But Plato is adduced here mainly because he is useful in understanding what Aristotle's attempted rehabilitation of rhetoric had to start from. Aristotle intended his *Rhetoric* to meet Plato's objection head on, but on epistemological more than ethical grounds. For all his respect for systematic logic and his faith in it, it seemed self-evident to Aristotle that much of what men had to resolve in the daily course of living was simply beyond the power of logic (or of any other systematic science known to him) to sort out for them. Rhetoric became the art necessary to men in areas where science wouldn't serve. Where right and wrong had no *a priori* determinants, rhetoric stepped in to undertake by art the chancy weighing of better and worse, and the offering of persuasive recommendations.

Two insights are involved here that we had better not forget: first, rhetoric begins in a terribly serious three-directional search (in the subject, in oneself, and in the audience) to discover the precise distinction between what is known, and therefore subject to logical proof, and what is only probable, and therefore subject to rhetorical demonstration; and, second, the constant modification, correction, and expansion of logic, ontology, psychology, and sociology will constantly redefine the means and purposes left to rhetoric, men and knowledge being as limited and changeable as they are. Aristotle made few specific recommendations about how to put language together for predictable effects, and reading him carefully, one cannot escape the feeling that he rather regrets a world in which rhetoric is a necessary correlate of our weaknesses. He would ofter seem to prefer a world certain of its division between logic for business and poetry for pleasure.

Hence, a basically "Aristotelian" way of looking at the relationship between rhetoric and language might go something like this: whatever specific content "rhetoric" has proper to itself alone as a system of using language will constantly have to be changing—and changing far more variously and rapidly than language itself. To put it a little less kindly, rhetoric as a knowable discipline surviving through history pretty well reduces to a certain theoretical tolerance for an area of effect in language which no available discipline can account for systematically. Or, for those who don't want to see it as theoretically distinct at all, rhetoric is any currently workable combination of techniques borrowed from several other disciplines, most notably linguistics, psychology, sociology and ethics.

On either of these definitions, what pertains to "rhetoric" and what to "language" will vary from time to time, depending mainly on what people think they know for sure about language at any given moment. Over the long historical haul, we get the familiar double funnel pattern, with the province of rhetoric narrowing as that of linguistics or some other adjacent discipline broad-

ens. It is a pattern not at all unlike the science/religion relationship, and there may be other instructive parallels here. Rhetoric and religion seem always forced to yield to the criteria of proof established by linguist and scientist, and scientist and linguist now lay undisputed claim to vast territories once ruled by cleric and rhetorician.

That whole way of looking at it, which for the moment may be called "Aristotelian," defines the issue epistemologically. As we move from Aristotle to Cicero and on down through late Roman times to Quintilian, the old ethical issue Plato had felt so strongly comes back into a new and rather altered prominence.

We should pause for a while over Quintilian's shrewd contention that the true fundamental rule of rhetoric--what actually sets its technical and purposive limits—is the character of the rhetor. This surely owes something to the old Platonic attitude of distrust, but it also controverts it: good rhetoric can't come from a bad man; good rhetoric will not necessarily proceed from good men (thus Quintilian salvages some claim to necessity for his art), but "to be a good rhetor, a man must first be a good man," an idea more familiar in Milton's rephrasing to apply to the great poet who must first become a great good man. I think what Quintilian understood, perhaps ahead of his time, was that most of what is commonly associated with the term "rhetoric," and most of the substance of the discipline passing under the name, is psychological (or sociological) and ethical, far more than it is linguistic. (Here I am forced to note the enormous contribution the General Semanticists of 30 or 40 years ago made toward so inextricably confusing the psychological, the ethical, and the linguistic that probably no one will ever be quite comfortable about the distinction again.)

Quintilian should not be over-credited for the re-formulation of a psychological-ethical definition of rhetoric. The rhetoric schools of late Rome reflect a similar principle: that to teach a man a style (in speaking or writing) you have to educate the whole man—modify his character through training. The late Roman schools, by our lights, may have made a remarkably limited and artificial try at what we call "liberal education," but what they did embodied some principles and assumptions that are at the very center of our problem, since our own current practice so often also embodies them, though less consciously or clearly.

First, we might take a careful look at that old Sophistic notion that the end product of a character and its education is a verbal style—a notion that will probably seem less queer and more palatable in its more recent formulation: style is the man. Most of the present pejorative sense of our word "sophistry" comes from our Greek and Roman forbears' disapproving recognition that the Sophists first formulated the notion that "Style is the man." Then too, at least ever since Plato many people (some of them critics of the system and some manipulators of it) have observed that the formula is deceptively easily reversible, and with disastrous ethical consequences. Say "The style is the man," and most of us think of a Milton or a Shelley; say "The man is the style," and we think of Madison Avenue and its Indian-snake-oil salesmen. The problem is definable, and it certainly didn't disappear along with the Roman rhetoric schools. Do you produce effective and desirable uses of language by giving a good man an effective liberal education (including language study) and then trusting him to make the "right" rhetorical choices? Or will you do better to teach him a carefully articulated system of "rhetoric," with the instruction: if you use language according to this system you will produce the effect of being educated and trustworthy.

I am aware that this arrangement of alternatives is logically faulty (it doesn't exhaust the possibilities), but it is one of the classical forms of the debate, and it is still very much with us. A large number of courses and text-anthologies for Freshman English right now are in fact predicated on the first alternative. On the evidence of such texts and courses, the operational definition of "rhetoric" is that it is capsulized liberal education, hopefully intended to produce better writing. The main difference between us and the Roman Sophists is that we undertake to do it in two or three quarters, three days a week, with unskilled instructors, and with little control and not much more knowledge of the student's prior education. All of us have heard, and probably most of us use now and then, the argument that in these degenerate days of technical and professional specialization, the Freshman English course is the only chance we have to give a man a liberal education before he disappears, without looking back, into the vast deserts of aerodynamics or obstetrics. I have even seen a jacket blurb on one Freshman text anthology claiming that the book fulfills better than any other the "primary purpose of the course—to transmit the central values of Western culture." And yet if not most of *us*, at least nearly all of our colleagues in other departments seem to expect that the practical product which justifies whatever course we call "Freshman Rhetoric" ought to be *good writing* from the student. If, as Paul Roberts pleaded in a kind of desperate hope several years ago, all these colleagues in other departments could be induced actually to enforce on their students standards of good writing befitting their individual disciplines, then the modern Arts College could become a kind of expanded version of a Roman Sophists' school for orators. As it is, the English department goes it alone (or so most of us believe), and to the extent that it pursues Quintilian's course, it does so with far less hope of success than the Sophists' rhetoric schools had. For however we may try to water down, cram, and capsulize, we cannot really re-educate a student enough in a two- or three-quarter course to affect his style of writing. And, unlike the old Roman schoolmasters, we don't control the rest of the curriculum, although all of us (with some kind of race-memory of our Sophist ancestors) know perfectly well that we should control it, because we could do a far better job than those who do.

As for the boundary between language and rhetoric, what happens in this "Sophist" idea of rhetoric is simply that language, like the other specific disciplines in a "liberal" education, is absorbed within rhetoric. Language study is an enclave within the whole discipline of rhetoric, and the boundary isn't so much between the two of them as it is around language. A fair analogue would be "the boundary between the Department of Linguistics and the College of Arts and Sciences." Even the implication of hierarchy, I think, is part of the modern Sophists' sense of the relation between them. Like his ancient counterpart, the modern Sophist-in-English-101 is comfortably confident that a smooth and vigorous style is more to be prized than raw-boned, flat-footed grammatical competence; that a sensitive soul ought to prefer expressing itself gracefully to distinguishing between structural and generative grammars. And who would seriously disagree? In fact, if from this point of view we define rhetoric as "what is left over after linguistics," what rhetorician could possibly feel slighted?

Still, I believe that it is largely this sense of the relationships which gives to the general linguistic ignorance of our graduate students and instructors

its characteristic blitheness. I don't seriously believe that they reject linguistic study for themselves and their students only because it is too hard or somehow wrong, although there are no doubt traces of both reasons. If those were the real or only reasons, I doubt that everyone would be so cheerful about the rejection. Rather, they see language study as at best only one of the elements in the education of a stylist, and not the most helpful at that; the *whole* is what constitutes "rhetoric"—what really counts. Remember, style is the man. The differentiating modern twist in the old attitude is that the twentieth-century Sophist T.A., in the context of modern education, knows he has an impossibly short time in which to get to the whole man, so he has nearly no time at all to mess with learning the individual parts which make up the whole—least of all with the one part (language) which his students come to him already naturally equipped with, so to speak. There is more than a little justice in his view.

It is easy for the frustrated linguist on the Freshman English Committee to make wry jokes about the sophistry of his colleagues and the new crop of T.A.'s. They will come in individually and in platoons, with no sense of shame whatever for their immorality, and refuse to teach from the proposed new textbook because it is heavily linguistic and they are ignorant. A few days later, they will all (on the grounds that they must teach the whole man) vote to adopt a textbook which requires them to lecture and lead discussions three days a week about demography, God, home economics, homosexuality in Samoa, city planning, third-stream jazz, and an optional pair by Bergen Evans and Dwight MacDonald on linguistics.

But such tired parochial humor may obscure an important point. The textbook subcommittee didn't prefer that second essay anthology because it represented particular things they thought they knew more about, but rather because it came much closer to their idea (or intuition) of a proper rhetoric—a system for getting at people's souls in order to improve their styles. No young instructor with a proper dedication to his mission is ever going to let his ignorance of something stand in the way of his teaching it if he understands its necessity and utility in terms of his own system of values. Most of them would even go right ahead and teach linguistics, if they weren't so convinced of the principle of the whole man and so understandably suspicious that linguistics really belongs to a hostile culture—to scientific, technical, specialistic, content-oriented education. Nor do I think it at all coincidental that "life style" is very nearly a sacred liturgical phrase these days in the essays and theses and discussion of the people who either are now or will soon be our beginning instructors in Freshman rhetoric.

This Third Sophistic simply *is* the dominant notion of rhetoric now—or at least by far the most common kind of practical attempt being made to solve the problem of how to teach rhetoric. If the movement which has in recent years begun to attract the label "New Rhetoric" seriously intends to mount a revolt against linguistics, it is wasting its time. In practice, at least in first-year college and university courses, the linguists aren't there and they never really were. The battle threatened fifteen or so years ago never came off; the spearhead of the linguists simply shattered against the massive passive resistance of the new Sophists.

The Sophists then, whether Roman or modern, may be taken to represent one kind of approach to what seems to be the eternal problem for rhetoricians: how to produce skilled persuaders and yet keep them from becoming con-men. But even to phrase the ethical issue that way

presupposes that there is (or may be discovered) a specific craft of persuasive language—a formulable set of rules and principles for the manipulation of language in order to change knowledge or inclination into commitment to act. But the truth is that neither the Second nor the New Sophistic has managed to come up with any such set of reliable rules and principles. Both have, for understandable and even laudable reasons, spent their major energies on trying to educate the whole man into that state of right-mindedness and broad control of his intellectual environment from which we might expect trustworthy and effective persuasion to issue more or less naturally. And so we come back to the second of the alternatives I suggested: Is there a craft—a learnable verbal discipline—which will predictably and reliably give the effect of right-minded persuasiveness, regardless of the state of grace of its promulgator? (Presumably no one would deliberately set out to formulate a *practicum* for wrong-minded persuasiveness.) Wouldn't it be pedagogically more direct and efficient if we could teach men to speak and write as though they were persuasively decent, wise, and honorable without having to take upon ourselves as teachers of rhetoric the horrible task of actually making them so?

Here we would seem to have come up against a real borderline where rhetoric and language inevitably bear directly upon each other. The linguists are theoretically able to chart for us the range of things it is possible to do, but can't someone chart for us which of the possibilities reliably get which effects? Yet it is a curious fact about classical rhetoric that from Plato's hostile survey on down through Aristotle's epistemological rehabilitation and the ethical extensions of Aristotle in Cicero, Quintilian, and Horace, nearly all the discussion is about the probable occasions, the tenable grounds, and the desired ends of rhetorical practice, and nearly none of it is about specific linguistic application. Very nearly all the profound and seminal perceptions we owe to the great classical rhetoricians concern the ethics, sociology, or psychology of using language, and would in fact be approximately as applicable to many other modes of public behavior.

It is to the academic Christian rhetoricians of the Middle Ages—especially of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—that we must turn for the first systematically direct attempts at a program for ordering language to predeterminable effects. And, perhaps surprisingly, the almost immediate consequence (as early as St. Augustine) is that rhetoric promptly becomes literary criticism—a development which gives another prototype for another modern attempt at defining or practicing "rhetoric."

In a sense, the medieval Christian rhetorician had a considerable advantage over his classical predecessors: the truth he was to serve with persuasive language was no longer up to him to seek, find or question. That truth was so overwhelmingly evident, in the incarnation and the Scriptures, that from Augustine on, the real question was whether it needed the service of rhetoricians at all—and if so, just what kind of service had God and the Law of Nature left to them to perform? To shorten a long and complex story which is not fully understood yet, medieval rhetoricians early decided that the way to find out was to turn to the great literature that had survived the wreck of Rome and try to classify its characteristics, on the assumption that whatever had helped classical literature to survive that catastrophe must be the very stuff persuasion is made of.

But the enormous difference, as measured against the Roman rhetoric schools, is that in the new Christian me-

dieval context, rhetoric is not the embracing and defining conception; it is rather a slightly untrustworthy but possibly useful tool in education. And—most important—rhetoric learns its craft by looking back and analyzing what has been written.

Most medieval analysts saw grammar, rhetoric, and logic as a continuum, and (insofar as fallen mortals are concerned) not very sharply distinguishable as separate disciplines, all blending into a kind of spectrum of devices and systems for instructing and persuading. There is a sense in which the whole medieval *trivium*, taken together, correlates fairly well with what I have been calling the "new Sophistic": both of them assume (for however different reasons) that it is more profitable, in studying or using language, to take it as a reflection of the nature and aspirations of human beings than as an objective system intricately fashioned of metalogical and metamathematical functions.

Still, the Middle Ages (having inherited a good deal of Plato's attitude) kept the course formally labelled "rhetoric" firmly and cautiously bracketed between the much more readily explicable and definable disciplines of grammar and logic. Quite often in the later Middle Ages (as with John of Salisbury) rhetoric was not so much a co-equal area of knowledge with the other two, as it was a kind of slightly suspect extension of their sober, workaday intellectual disciplines into decorative play.

Beneath the surface of an outmoded terminology, John of Salisbury may surprise us with his similarity to Wittgenstein or Carnap—with the way in which linguistics and logic tend to converge, for him as for them, toward identity ("the true body of reality") and rhetoric melts away, first into poetry and then finally into psychology.

To the extent that rhetoric, in the specific sense of a body of analyzable verbal skills, remains in the picture for either the medieval or modern analyst on these terms, it does so almost exclusively as stylistics—the concern of the psychologist or the literary critic, depending on what you want to find out from that formal residue left over in particular, individual language structures after their logical and linguistic elements have been accounted for.

Once again the elusive "boundary" has shifted away from us and stands now not between language and rhetoric, but between language and literary criticism, with rhetoric that branch of criticism specifically devoted to the formal patternings of words: figures of speech, sentence rhythm, the balance and arrangement of clauses and phrases, even rhyme and prosody. We may find it odd, or lamentably confused, that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the terms *rhetorica* and *poetica* were practically synonymous, but those literary patternings of language are one of the things we still commonly call "rhetoric." And the New Critics of the 1930's and 40's are to most of us still the familiar champions of a direct and systematic analytical attack on the verbal structure of a poem or story that any thirteenth-century university man would have recognized at once as "rhetorical" in his sense of the word. The great difference, of course, is that for Ransom, Tate, or Empson, the analysis of the poem is its own end; they never sought to abstract from their "rhetorical criticism" any set of general rules or patterns by which someone else might form his style. For Geoffrey of Vinsauf or Jean de Garland, those rules and patterns (the specific catalogues of verbal devices) were almost the whole substance and purpose of literary analysis and of the "rhetoric" books they wrote about literary analysis. And finally, the medieval rhetorician/stylistic-analyst always insisted that the rhetoric he was defining was to be used by men with

prior commitments and ulterior motives, both of which are specifically excluded from the rhetorical-stylistic concerns of the New Critics.

No one knows how much positive correlation there is (I suspect a great deal), but at about the same time as the wave of New Criticism was cresting in American graduate schools, the first wave of poetry and short-story anthologies for Freshman Rhetoric began pouring from the publishers, and a lot of Freshman English courses were redesigned to take advantage of them, becoming in the process not a little like the middle course in the old *trivium*. Students were trained (and often still are) to read the best literature, picking out and analyzing its symbols and figures of speech. There is even quite often in our modern literary rhetoric courses, with their heavy emphasis on stylistics, either the implication or the overt attempt to foster imitative re-application in the students' own writing, though fortunately we have abandoned to the creative writing departments that last indignity which medieval rhetoricians used to force upon Vergil and Ovid. At least, I know of few or no Freshman courses where we ask the baffled innocents to make a stylistic analysis of a Wallace Stevens poem, catalogue its rhetorical devices, and then write an imitation of it using the same methods. Like the New Sophists, our Neo-Scholastic rhetoricians seem more inclined to rely on a kind of general and unstructured transfer from the substance of the course to the student's soul and style.

At a rough guess, among the Freshman English courses being offered in the United States right now, the literary rhetoric of the Neo-Scholastics probably runs a very close second to the spiritual regeneration of the New Sophists as the commonest mode of practicing rhetorical instruction. And it is always possible to make the best of both worlds; in some institutions we divide the academic year and arrange the course so that, from October to January, we make them whole men, and then from February to May we teach them to admire the styles of Auden and Eliot.

Yet the Neo-Scholastics do bring—or rather might have brought—the practice of rhetoric much closer to a direct contact with the study of language. But it hasn't worked out that way. We grew too soon weary and scornful of what looked to many like verbal hair-splitting, and without ever really answering most of the questions the New Critics raised, academic criticism has moved on to other things. The critical light blazing in the eye of the T.A. these days is most likely to reflect anthropology, psychology, mythography, or all three. So when we put him into the format of that Freshman course designed to find stylistic truth in great literature, the term "stylistic" acquires a considerably altered definition, one including few if any elements that are properly linguistic.

In general, the actual designing and teaching of the standard Freshman writing courses in our time has not made significant use of modern linguistics. Nor are there many encouraging signs—in the commonly used textbooks or among the people who regularly do the teaching—of any growing inclination to explore the boundaries between language and rhetoric by investigating how far the results of the "linguistic revolution" can take us.

At the turn of this century, Rhetoric was a stern-faced spinster from whose steel-rimmed spectacles flashed illuminated slogans like "It is we" and "Shall for future, will for intention." By the 1930's, it was apparent that the old girl had to go. For one thing, she too often turned out to be wrong about the language, despite her prim and pure good intentions. But worst of all, what good was a Rhetoric who couldn't persuade even her own captive audience? The

last time anyone in the English Department saw her, she had painted her eyelids lavender and was making a shameful living in the Radio-TV-Journalism Department. Her old office is now shared by two very busy and slightly worried young men, one with a beard. They talk a lot about the threat of overspecialized technical education, and the archetypal myths of human experience, and how badly their students write. For just a few terms sometime in the early fifties, there was another one in there too, who made the rest of the Department pretty uneasy. He was a pushy type in a corduroy jacket who kept quoting Gleason and Chomsky, and didn't seem to like *literature* very much. But one Spring he got a grant from NSF or the State Department and packed up his tape recorder and disappeared into the hills of eastern Kentucky. Although he left a few of his things in the office, he has never come back. Actually, though everyone is naturally a little sad about it, they're all quite a bit relieved, too.

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